

Provide Emergency Assistance and Eliminate Bureaucracy to Fight the Mountain Pine Beetle Epidemic in the Black Hills National Forest
By Stephanie Herseth Sandlin

In order to protect local Black Hills communities and preserve the forest for future generations, we must take even more aggressive action to combat what has become the largest and most intense outbreak of mountain pine beetles in recorded history. To continue my efforts to combat the mountain pine beetle epidemic in the Black Hills, I recently hosted USDA Deputy Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment, Jay Jensen. Deputy Under Secretary Jensen and I took a flight over the Black Hills to view the damage done to the forest by the pine beetle infestation. We also met with representatives from local communities and the forest resource industry. I believe that he was not only impressed by the scope of problem, but also by the level of community involvement in issues affecting the health of the Black Hills National Forest.

In September, I followed up on the Deputy Undersecretary's visit by calling on the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the U.S. Forest Service and the White House to use the resources provided to them by Congress to provide emergency assistance and eliminate bureaucracy in the effort to fight the mountain pine beetle epidemic in the Black Hills National Forest (BHNF). I also requested greater allocation of resources to fight pine beetles next year.

First, I'm urging USDA to use its authority to provide immediate emergency funding to combat the mountain pine beetle infestation in the BHNF. The Secretary is authorized to provide funding to USDA agencies for the "arrest and eradication of contagious or infectious diseases or pests of animals, poultry, or plants." The mountain pine beetle epidemic is exactly the kind of emergency for which this provision was designed.

Second, I'm urging the White House Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) to eliminate bureaucracy and allow an emergency response under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Under emergency circumstances, NEPA regulations allow federal agencies and CEQ to agree upon expedited arrangements for compliance with NEPA in order to allow the agency to act aggressively "to control the immediate impact of the emergency." I believe the current mountain pine beetle epidemic is such an emergency and that federal forest managers in the Black Hills should be allowed the flexibility they need to respond effectively to the crisis.

Third, I'm calling for increased Forest Service funding for the BHNF next year because it's clear that more funding is needed to respond effectively and aggressively to the ever growing mountain pine beetle epidemic in western South Dakota. Earlier this year, I joined with Representative Lummis of Wyoming to lead a bipartisan effort to prevent Forest Service funding from being removed from our region. In a reversal, the Forest Service not only didn't reduce funding in our region, but allocated an additional \$2 million to combat the pine beetles in South Dakota.

Despite Forest Service attention and action, current outbreaks of mountain pine beetles continue to pose great threats to the BHNF. These outbreaks are the largest and most intense in recorded history, affecting an estimated 356,000 acres of ponderosa pine in the last 13 years. The spread of the epidemic is now accelerating at a dangerous pace, with beetle infested trees showing up in new areas throughout the forest. As you may know, the Mt. Rushmore National Monument recently announced that, for the second year in a row, the traditional Independence Day fireworks celebration will not be held because of concern about wildfire danger caused by nearby trees that have been killed by mountain pine beetles.

This epidemic has created the potential for catastrophic fires that threaten communities, forests, watersheds, wildlife habitat, recreational opportunities, and local tourism industries, inhibiting job growth and economic recovery. While important efforts have been made so far, including an additional \$2 million this year provided by the U.S. Forest Service to battle the mountain pine beetle in South Dakota, far more must be done to bring the threat under control. The measures I'm calling for would both reassure South Dakotans that aggressive steps are being taken and provide the immediate and important boost that is needed.

My work on this topic is ongoing, and I will continue to work with state, local, and federal officials to make progress. You may visit my website at www.hersethsandlin.gov to stay updated on what is being done to improve our ability to combat the pine beetle infestation. As we continue to search for solutions, I look forward to your input as I travel around the state.